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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of special education referral and placement practices within Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools. A group of 650 low-achieving elementary school students, identified to be "at risk" for failure, was monitored to examine special education referrals or placements. Three hundred of the students were studied to determine the types of interventions taking place to improve the students' achievement. It was found that minorities, especially Blacks and Hispanics, were over-represented in the handicapping categories of learning disabilities and speech/language disorders. This over-representation was felt to be due, in part, to inappropriate identification of low achievement factors as a handicapping indicator. No significant differences were found in referral practices to explain the increased odds of special education labeling for minority groups. Staff expectations and perceptions were found to be powerful factors in the referral process. Teachers referred students because they perceived them to be achieving at a level below their peers. Staff seemed unaware of other regular education resources to assist low-achieving students. Classroom teachers were most likely to use management interventions rather than instructional interventions to assist the students. Educational implications of these selected findings and suggestions for improving the situation are offered. (JDD)

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SYMPOSIUM

Systems-Oriented Evaluation: A Better Approach to Improving the Achievement of Minority Students

Montgomery County Public Schools
Rockville, Maryland

A STUDY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL AND PLACEMENT PRACTICE

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SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL AND PLACEMENT PRACTICES IN MCPS

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Introduction

As you have no doubt observed, several common themes run through all of the studies described here today. All represent problems currently of interest at the local and national level. All involve achievement-related outcomes. Each study describes problems disproportionately experienced by minority students, particularly blacks and hispanics, but exclusionary of asians. Our collective papers present a composite view because we believe we can learn more about improving the success of minority students by looking at different aspects of school performance outcomes in a systems-oriented evaluation.

I want to talk today about a study that we conducted of special education referral and placement practices. I want to discuss some possible reasons why minority students are placed in special education programs disproportionately. I will attempt to establish a link between this topic and the issue of improving minority achievement. I believe we will learn about improving the success of minority students, particularly those most likely to be referred to special education, by examining labeling outcomes and factors that influence those outcomes. I think there are implications from this study for improving the achievement of minorities and reducing inappropriate referrals of minorities to special education.

Background

Our study of special education referral and placement practices within Montgomery County Public Schools grew out of system-wide and community concerns about the disproportionate numbers of minority students referred to special education. We had some general statistical data showing that increasing numbers of students were identified as handicapped. Many of them were minorities but we were not sure about the extent of the problem or its cause.

We decided to examine this problem by looking at what happened to students in the regular school population who were seen by staff to be "at risk" for failure. We identified these students from 28 elementary schools where we asked staff to name low achieving students. We followed a group of 650 students during the course of a school year and monitored the outcomes for these students. That is, we looked at whether these students were referred and placed in a special education program. We followed a smaller group of 300 of these students closely to

see what kinds of things were done to help them improve their achievement. We were particularly interested in what happened to these students once they were referred to a screening and evaluation team. So, we talked to regular and special education teachers, principals, counselors, and psychologists about the reasons for referrals and special education placements. We also gathered information from student records and observations of screening, referral and placement meetings.

Our study did indeed confirm what many policy-makers suspected, that too many minority students were being labeled in some handicapping categories. In particular, minorities were over-represented in the so-called "soft" handicapping categories of learning disability and speech/language disorders, categories having vague definitions, involving subjective decisions and most closely related to achievement.

Findings on Labeling Outcomes

Overall, our data show that the most frequently used handicapping labels in MCPS are for learning disabilities (54%) and speech/language disorders (41%) and these data are in keeping with national patterns. We examined the outcome of disproportionate labeling within handicapping categories and racial groups. We found that the odds for special education referral and placement were out of balance for blacks and hispanics, particularly with regard to the label "learning disability" for blacks and "speech/language disordered" for hispanics. Black and hispanic students were twice as likely as whites to be referred to a special education assessment team. Boys were twice as likely as girls to be referred and labeled. We found elementary students were most likely to be referred by their classroom teachers at end of the second grade and labeled at the beginning of the third grade. We found that students were most likely to be referred for achievement-related problems involving reading or math.

In addition, we found that the profile of students seen to be at risk and those newly identified as handicapped matched a profile of those already receiving services. A close scrutiny of these data and referral practices led us to believe that inappropriate identification of low achievement factors as a handicapping indicator is a significant part of the problem of the over-representation of black and hispanic students as handicapped.

Findings on Referral Practices

When we looked at referral practices, we were very surprised to find that there were no significant differences in the referral practices or interventions that were used between whites and minorities. Whatever school level practices used, were equally

good or equally flawed for both. We found no significant differences in initial referral problems, interventions, due process procedures, assessment procedures or documentation. This left us with questions about what was happening to minorities, specifically blacks and hispanics to increase their odds for special education labeling.

Reasons for Minority Referrals

We found four interesting phenomenon in our study. First, we found that staff in schools named black students twice as often as whites and hispanics as students at risk for failure. Asians were half as likely to be named. All of this suggests to us that staff expectations and perceptions are powerful factors in the referral process. Second, we found that once students were "tagged" as having some type of achievement problem, they faced an increased likelihood of being referred to a screening and evaluation team to find a cause. And this increased their probability of being labeled. All of which is in keeping with recent literature which suggests that students often cross the line between regular and special education once teachers notice problems and seek help outside the classroom.

Third, we began to get some clues when we talked to staff. Our interviews confirmed that teachers referred students because they perceived them to be achieving at a level below their peers. Teachers acknowledged that many students referred for evaluations probably were not handicapped. Teachers referred these students for a variety of idiosyncratic reasons. Often teachers felt unable to allocate sufficient time and energy to low functioning students, yet they were aware and concerned about the cumulative effects of low achievement. Some staff referred to these low achieving students as "grey zone" kids. One staff person aptly noted that "these students might not be handicapped now but they soon will be if they don't get some individual help." Thus suggesting that some teachers viewed handicaps as conditions brought on by the cumulative effects of continuous low achievement. Implicit in this comment is also the notion that handicaps can be prevented by appropriate early interventions. If these views are typical of many regular education teachers' perspectives about what constitutes handicapping conditions, then it is not surprising that increasing numbers of low achieving students are referred to special education.

In our study, principals and teachers alike, freely admitted that they referred students because they wanted to get help, resources, and services to circumvent the cumulative effects of low achievement. They viewed special education as the system's "gate-keeper" of resources. Unfortunately, staff seemed unaware of other regular education resources to assist low achieving students. Teachers expressed frustration that few

options for individualized help were available outside of special education.

Fourth, when we looked at the quality of interventions used to assist students, we were struck by one particularly interesting finding. Classroom teachers were most likely to use management interventions (i.e., changing student seating/workgroup, calling parents, using homework checklists) rather than instructional interventions (i.e., learning style accommodations, peer tutors, oral tests, modifying instructional approach). These findings suggest that regular education teachers need to develop a repertoire of accommodating instructional interventions to help low achieving students.

Thus, we believe all these factors in combination establish a clear link between disproportionate minority labeling outcomes and the issue of achievement. In the main, referral decisions were based on staff concerns for the individual welfare of students, misconceptions about differences in handicaps and low achievement, and perceptions of limited regular education options to help. In addition, the school system has recently faced increased community and systemwide pressure to improve minority achievement, thus focusing staff attention even more acutely on helping students improve achievement through all available avenues.

Improving the Situation

Shepard's research in the early 1980s found that students who were inappropriately labeled and placed in special education were often low achievers who were not handicapped, but whose needs were not met satisfactorily by regular education programs. Since then, we have seen a number of efforts to encourage schools to meet the needs of all students more effectively. More recently, "Regular Education Initiative" guidelines are indicative of federally supported efforts to look more closely at our regular education programs. We have begun to recognize that implicit in special education's "least restrictive environment" clause lies a mandate to provide more individualized services for all students in the mainstream, regardless of whether they are handicapped, bilingual, or "grey zone" students.

We need to look more carefully at successful regular education interventions which promise to improve minority achievement. We need to find ways to improve instruction, attend to differences in learning styles and cultures, and build upon the strengths of low achieving students. Although our consciousness is raised by our study and similar findings from other studies, we must support additional efforts to explore those interventions which are most effective.

Implications

I believe there are implications embedded in this study and all of our collected studies for improving achievement for "at risk" students who linger on the fringes of the mainstream. First, schools need to have more options available inside regular education and outside special education to help low achieving students. Staff need training and support in exploring those options. Second, we need to clarify what we mean when we talk about interventions to help low achieving students. Regular education teachers, in particular, need assistance in using instructional interventions that not only attend to individual differences, but also indicate an awareness of the differences between management interventions and instructional interventions. We need to support efforts to help teachers develop a broader range of instructional accommodations to deal with individual student differences. Third, we need to develop clear and consistent guidelines to help staff differentiate between handicapping conditions, especially in the so-called "soft" categories, and low achievement.

Although I have described only selected findings from this study today, other findings from this study support major efforts within our school system to explore the best ways to improve achievement for students on the fringes of success. Unfortunately, too many of these students are minorities and too many are truly "at risk" in our schools and in our society for failure. Major efforts to provide appropriate regular education supports and to reduce inappropriate minority referrals and placements in special education are essential if schools are to become increasingly effective.